

DIVERSITY NEWS

October 2008

Yvonne: In last month's edition of Diversity News, we talked to you about managing organizational change. Well, here in VA's Office of Diversity Management and Equal Employment Opportunity, we underwent some organizational changes of our own and we now have a new Deputy Assistant Secretary, Ms. Georgia Coffey.

Durodgio: Ms. Coffey comes with over 25 years of EEO, diversity, human resources, and program management experience in the public and private sectors. Prior to joining VA, she served as the Director of Equal Employment Opportunity & Diversity Management for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration or FDA where she was recognized for developing the agency's first multi-year EEO & Diversity Strategic Action Plan and Annual Performance Report, creating the agency's first Diversity Council, implementing FDA's first Mandatory EEO Compliance Training for Managers and Supervisors, issuing the agency's first Diversity Outreach and Retention Plan, publishing Guidance in Conducting a Fair and EEO Compliant Selection Process, and implementing several other groundbreaking EEO and diversity initiatives.

Yvonne: Prior to her service at FDA, Ms. Coffey was the EEO Officer and Acting EEO & Diversity Manager for Montgomery County Government and was appointed to several County Commissions including the Commission on People with Disabilities, the Human Relations Commission Hate/Violence Committee, the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and the Rockville Human Rights Commission where she assisted in the creation of the city's first community mediation program.

Durodgio: Ms. Coffey's role here in VA, as a diversity leader, will be an important one. Whether it's concerning organizational performance, teamwork, or diversity management—all topics we've addressed before in previous editions of Diversity News—leadership plays a key role in the success of these collaborative efforts.

Yvonne: It's true; diversity management must be driven by the leadership of the organization and that's why we're so excited to have Ms. Coffey join VA's leadership team. Her extensive knowledge and experience in the diversity and EEO fields will certainly add to VA's diversity management and EEO program.

Durodgio: Yvonne recently had an opportunity to sit down and talk with Ms. Coffey about her passion for the kind of work she does and her aspirations for DM&EEO and for VA.

Yvonne: So what is your vision for diversity management in the public sector?

Georgia: Well, thanks for asking Yvonne because I feel so passionate about this work and it's always a pleasure to talk about it. First, let me say how proud I am to be with VA. I can think of no Federal agency that has a more noble mission than serving our country's veterans. But my vision of diversity management really is rooted in two fundamental beliefs, and that is: there is no higher calling than public service and no more important work in public service than the work that we do—the work of diversity, inclusion, equity, guaranteeing peoples' rights in the workplace.

In addition to that, though, I take it a step further. I think, as you'll see with the demographics increasing, becoming increasingly diverse in the United States, that we have to broaden our definition of diversity and I, when I speak of diversity, I am speaking of not only race, gender, ethnicity, national origin—all the traditionally protected categories that you'll see—but going one step beyond, and that is: diversity of thought, diversity of perspective, diversity of contributions to the mission. I think we have to start thinking these broader terms to make sure we have universal acceptance of our notion of diversity. And, by the way, let me quickly add that this broader definition in no way diminishes the original definition, because where else does our diversity of thought—of our intellectual capital—come from, if not from our human diversity: who we are and what our ancestry is. So, I hope that we will be able to send the message through vehicles like today—and like other vehicles that we have in our office—that diversity is really something that's about every single one of us and more than just how we were raised or how, what ethnicity we were born into, but really what our thought patterns are, what our intellectual contributions are to this agency.

Yvonne: What are some of the important diversity issues that our Department faces today?

Georgia: Well, you know it's very interesting. VA is, as I said, perhaps the most noble organization in terms of its mission. I can think of few organizations that have such a noble mission. It's important that we give the best possible quality care and service to our veterans and to their families, after all, who has given more to this country than our veterans? In order to do that, as I alluded to just a moment ago, we have to have a diverse workforce.

It goes without saying that the workforce has to be talented and qualified and highly capable, but it also has to be reflective of the constituency that we're serving; in our case, it's veterans and—quite frankly—as a public service agency, we are really serving the entire Nation and, as the second largest Federal agency, whatever VA does others will follow, and it's already happened. I can see in some of our workforce analysis areas, we have already established ourselves as a leader. I'd like that to become the case with diversity management, too. I want people to look at VA and to say, "They are servicing perhaps our Nation's most precious resource, our veterans. In addition, as such

a large agency, whatever they do has an impact on the rest of Federal government.”

So this is where I want to bring in a number of initiatives that I’ve been thinking about to help communicate that message. One of the initiatives is simply an educational initiative, a training initiative. I want to teach all of our workforce, starting with our management, again about the value, the business value as well as the economic and legal value of EEO and diversity. I also want to convey a sense of community, of partnership, in our organization. Again, none of us are in this by ourselves. Management has to link up with us, has to link up with offices like the Office of Resolution Management to deal with conflicts. We have a number of good programs here at VA already that serve to mitigate conflict; our alternative dispute resolution program that’s operated out of ORM is a wonderful example of that. I want to bring a lot of partners together, including the administration leadership together, to come to a common solution for, number one, eradicating discrimination where it exists, opening our doors to a more inclusive operation. Let me explain that by saying it’s not enough just to have a diverse workforce, you now have to have the conditions in place to make all of them feel empowered to contribute to the mission. And, of course, conflict management is going to be a big piece of all of this, too.

What are some of the specific strategies? As I said, training is a big piece of it. Communication is certainly a big piece of it. Again, I think this event that we’re doing right here today, VA is way ahead of the curve in terms of having a regular communication outlet like Diversity News to reach out to as many people as possible.

We’re going to be starting a Diversity Advisory Council, which you’ll be hearing more about in the coming months and I know that our administrations, particularly our largest administration, VHA, has a very admirable Diversity Advisory Board that’s been very effective in accomplishing an awful lot of good things for VHA. We want to leverage on their great successes and make it broader for the entire Veterans Affairs department so that we can all communicate and share these best practices with each other.

Those are just a few of the strategies that I’ve been thinking about to bring to VA, some of the things that I’ve done in the past. I look forward to learning more about what VA has to offer so that we can capitalize on what they already—what we already—have to make this really a good diverse and inclusive organization.

Yvonne: So do you have any other major initiatives that you’ll take on with your new position as DAS?

Georgia: Yes, I’ve given some thought to some products that I’ve worked on in the past and I think would work very well at VA. One is actually a booklet, it’s a small booklet/pamphlet that provides managers and supervisors with often much-

needed guidance on how to conduct an EEO-compliant selection process. You know, it's not always intuitive how to conduct a barrier-free recruitment process or selection process and I'm hoping that we can partner with HR—with our human resources folks who are experts in this area—and work together to come up with some guidance that we can actually give to selecting officials when they do these selection processes. Very often, they just look, they just need quick little tips on how to make sure we're not allowing barriers to exist and also it's a proactive measure. For example, using special hiring authorities; I think we have some access to very, very good special hiring authorities here in VA that we could help use as tools to diversify our workforce. Sometimes managers just need little reminders about things like that.

One of the other things that I've thought about is increasing our strategic partnerships with both the educational community, the higher-educational community, as well as affinity group communities. Now, when I say that, clearly, no doubt, VA has a long history, as many Federal agencies do, of memorandum of understanding and partnerships with these groups, but I'd like to make them actually more active—more interactive—if you will. I think there's a lot VA can do for these organizations and a lot that these organizations can do for VA in terms of building a pipeline for our workforce.

As you know, Yvonne, we're starting planning effort in our own office first, in our own Office of Diversity Management and EEO. And the reason for that is to help articulate our own vision, mission, goals, and objectives first to see where we want to take our office. The reason that's important for the entire Department is because the vision, mission, goals that we try to articulate for ourselves ultimately are going to have impact on the service that we give to VA.

Now this, again, is not going to be a unilateral plan that we come up with. Part of our process, as you already know, is going to be to reach out to our stakeholders, to the administration leadership, to the various diversity groups and councils that are already in existence and to our external stakeholders, as well, as well as some of our veterans groups to see how we can bridge that plan, bridge our vision, of what we want to do within the VA to ultimately better service all of our veterans and all of our customers in general. I think you will find that once we issue the strategic plan, there'll be more clarity about what our purpose is; about the impact we can have on this agency; and, hopefully, about some of the benefits we can bring to everybody in the VA—employees, managers, and stakeholders alike.

And then finally, as I mentioned before, I'm a huge believer in communication. I think more than half the battle is how we communicate our mission, our goals, our objectives to our community here at VA as well as the external community. Again, I think venues such as this are perfect. Another venue that I think is a very helpful little tool is our NewsLinks that I know you're very involved with, Yvonne. In fact, one of the last ones that I saw had a remarkably interesting

piece in it. It spoke about a study that was done recently at UCLA and actually one of our own VA family members, a doctor out at Portland, I believe, led the study which—for the first time—actually made a link between medical school diversity and ultimately patient care. This study showed that those physicians and nurses who were coming out of diverse medical schools, in fact, felt they were better prepared to serve a diverse community. That's a critical link between diversity and the performance outcome of patient care which, of course, VA is so involved in.

So I think there's lots of things we can do that just sort of increase our level of effort that step up our energies to try to make this diverse workforce for the betterment, again, not only just veterans, but all of our American citizens.

Yvonne: Well, thank you so much for joining us today. Do you have any final parting words that you'd like to share with our viewers?

Georgia: Sure, I'd like to just sort of remind all of us that we're all in this together. You know, recently we witnessed some tragedies—you know, the Gulf Coast events, not too long ago in our history we had 9/11, there are other tragedies that we have faced and, no doubt, will face in the future. Well, one lesson that we have to bring from all of this is that we can't go this alone and we can't afford divisive separations of ourselves as people. Diversity is extremely important in terms of bringing out the values of our differences, but never forget that it all leads to a unified front. Hopefully, the concept of inclusion will soon become even as powerful, if not more powerful, than diversity alone.

I ask all of you here in VA—our employees, our managers, our doctors, our physicians, our veterans, everyone here at VA—to please join me, join us, join our office, in what I would like to be an ongoing partnership to help bring diversity and inclusion to VA and make it even stronger than it already is.

Durodgio: In future editions of Diversity News, we'll be updating you on these new initiatives, but that's all we have time for in this edition of Diversity News. We appreciate your watching, and we hope you'll tune in again next month. Until then, for more frequent updates on diversity news, sign up for our free weekly e-mail news service: NewsLink. Just send an e-mail message to the address shown below with the words "Subscribe News" in the subject line.

Yvonne: And check out our bimonthly newsletter, Diversity@Work, available as a download on our Web site or by e-mail from our office. Also, we want to hear from YOU! If you'd like to share your story ideas, comments, or suggestions, please e-mail us at dmeeo@va.gov with the words "Diversity News" in the subject line. Until next time...

Yvonne and Durodgio: Have a great month!